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ABSTRACT

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Whole Language Teaching and Mandated District Objectives Are Compatible

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Running Head: WHOLE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT: Whole Language Teaching and Mandated District Objectives are compatible

Janet C. Richards and Joan P. Gipe

Many teachers with a whole language philosophical orientation question how to cover madated district objectives using whole language instruction. One problem is that curriculum objectives are usually presented in discrete, isolated fragments. Second, teachers are also expected to document what skills they have covered. Third, specific guidelines which demonstrate how teachers can structure whole language classroom activities are lacking.

This article presents a vignette which provides answers to teachers who wish to initiate whole language instruction and also cover district objectives. The teacher in the vignette follows curriculum guidelines and: (1) allows her students' interests and instructional needs to determine what is directly taught and reviewed; (2) incorporates reading/language arts lessons with multiple disciplines when appropriate; (3) integrates and interrelates reading and writing instruction; (4) promotes student/teacher collaboration and student discussion and decision making; (5) makes learning meaningful personal and functional; and (6) helps students to actively participate in their own learning.

Whole Language Teaching and Mandated District Objectives Are Compatible

"How can I cover mandated district objectives using whole language instruction?" is a puzzling and often unanswered question for many teachers who have a whole language philosophical orientation. Teachers are commonly expected to teach in accordance with mandated district objectives which are usually presented in discrete isolated fragments (e.g., "alphabetizes with first letter" or "locates title of a book"). Likewise, teachers in conventional educational settings are often expected to show what skills they are developing in keeping with district objectives (Slaughter, 1988; Strickland, 1989). Since a whole language philosophy implies that teachers consider the instructional interests and needs of children rather than merely implement an explicitly identified instructional program, these expectations cause concern for teachers who believe in a whole language philosophy. As a result, these teachers often think that it is impossible to cover mandated district objectives within a whole language instructional framework (Goodman, 1986; Harste & Stevens, 1984).

One problem for teachers who lean toward a whole language orientation is that specific guidelines which demonstrate how teachers can structure classroom activities which support their whole language beliefs are lacking. As Slaughter (1988) has stated, "it is especially important that more explicit guidelines for the teacher's role in directing and supporting student learning be made available for novice teachers in training, and for experienced teachers who want to shift from a conventional program to a whole

language approach" (p. 34).

The following vignette provides such guidelines. The vignette demonstrates how a real teacher in a real classroom covers district objectives within the context of a whole language philosophy. The teacher, Miss Hanks, follows district objectives and still: (1) allows her students' interests and instructional needs to determine what is directly taught and reviewed; (2) incorporates reading/language arts lessons with multiple disciplines when appropriate (e.g., music, art, science, social studies, and mathematics); (3) integrates and interrelates reading and writing instruction; (4) promotes student/teacher collaboration and student discussion and decision making; (5) makes learning meaningful, personal, and functional (i.e., serving a purpose) to students; and (6) helps students to actively participate in their own learning (Newman, 1985).

The specified objectives listed in Miss Hanks' curriculum guide are covered as they arise naturally within the context of daily whole language instruction and activities, which to a large extent are organized around topics and themes. Miss Hanks is knowledgeable about what objectives are important for her grade level, therefore she can document which objectives are covered and which objectives must be reviewed in small ad hoc groups or in whole class groups. As seen in the vignette, Miss Hanks also recognizes opportunities for integrating instruction across the curriculum.

Whole Language Teaching: A Vignette

All teachers know that it is very important to become familiar with their school's prescribed curriculum and district objectives. Therefore, before the school year began, Miss Hanks, a first grade teacher, carefully previewed what her students were expected to learn throughout the year. She studied the objectives carefully so that she had an understanding of the entire scope or breadth of the curriculum. By carefully reading the curriculum objectives and jotting down key words or phrases representing the school district's expectations, she gained an in-depth understanding of the scope of the curriculum for the entire school year. She knew that this ultimately made it easier for her to recognize opportunities for integrating instruction with curriculum mandates and to help her emphasize important objectives as they might arise within the context of instruction. Additionally, Miss Hanks looked for connections, or ways to integrate across the curricular areas, by brainstorming ideas for possible unit themes (e.g., holidays, wild animals, occupations, outer space) and learning center activities (e.g., graphing the types of pets owned by the students, writing a business letter to another state's Chamber of Commerce asking for information).

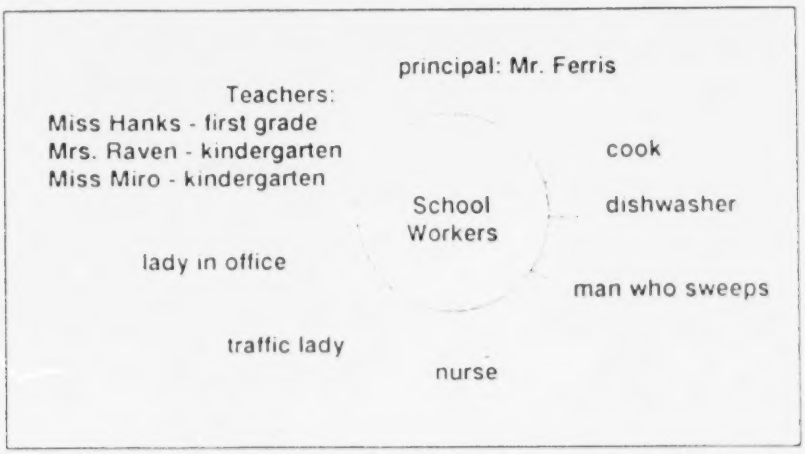
During the first week of school, Miss Hanks began determining her students' instructional needs and interests. Using this knowledge, she further refined ideas for possible units and activities. For example, she learned that a possible unit on wild animals was inappropriate because her students had already studied wild animals in

kindergarten. She also recognized that a large percentage of her students needed to learn how to listen carefully and follow instructions. She knew that class activities would need to be reevaluated and refined accordingly.

One morning early in the school year, Miss Hanks discovered that her first grade students needed to learn about the workers in their school. Miss Hanks had to send a report to the principal and asked for a student to deliver it. None of the students responded, so Miss Hanks asked, "Who knows the principal?". When John replied, "I do. He's the man who directs traffic in the hall", Miss Hanks made an on the spot interactive decision (Clark & Yinger, 1975; Morine-Dershimer & Vallance, 1975; Nespor, 1984) to teach a short lesson on their school administrator and staff because her students came in daily contact with these people. She assembled her students for a group meeting (Glasser, 1969) where all of the students sat in a circle in order to freely communicate with each other. Miss Hanks brought a chart and a marker over to the circle of students. She sat down and said, "Boys and girls, it is important for us to know all of the people who work in our school. We spend a large amount of time here. The workers help us and we need to know who they are. Let's list as many people who work in our school as we can."

Miss Hanks initiated the beginning of a semantic map. She wrote in the middle of the chart **"School Workers"** and asked, "Who knows the name of a person or a job that a person does in our school?" As her students raised their hands, Miss Hanks called

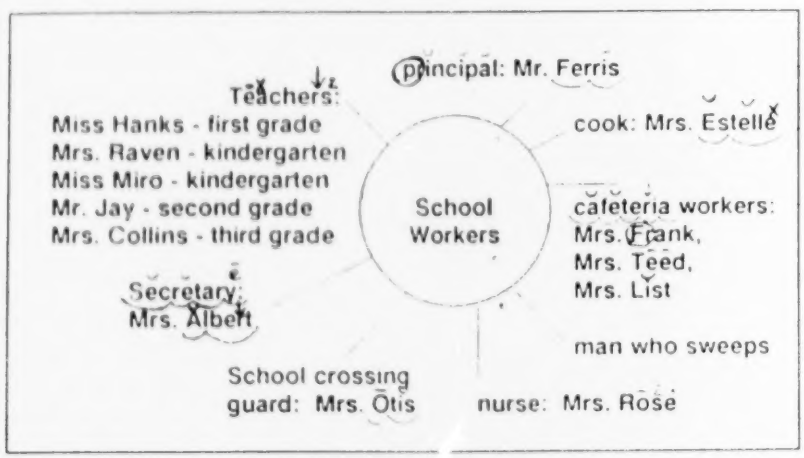
on them one by one and wrote down exactly what they said. In a few minutes, their semantic map looked like this:



Next, the students and Miss Hanks reviewed their ideas as Miss Hanks pointed to each entry on the semantic map and read the names and job descriptions listed. Miss Hanks asked her students if they could think of any more additions for their semantic map. When no one responded, Miss Hanks made another on the spot interactive decision to continue the lesson by expanding the semantic map about the names and jobs of some of the people in their school. For example, she pointed to the job of cook and told the students that the cook in the school's cafeteria was named Mrs. Estelle. She then printed in Mrs. Estelle's name. She pointed to the job of dishwasher and said, "The people who work in the cafeteria are called cafeteria workers. I will print their names. Their names are Mrs. Frank, Mrs. Teed, and Mrs. List." Because she also knew

that "capitalizes proper names" was listed as an objective, she said, "All of those names begin with a capital letter. We always write names with a capital letter, just like your names." Pointing to the capital letters, she added, "This is a capital F, this is a capital T, and this is a capital L."

Miss Hanks also knew that "recognizes sounds and symbols for consonant blends" was listed as an objective, therefore she said, "Look at the cafeteria workers' last names, Frank, Teed, and List. Two of these names begin with consonant letters, and one begins with a consonant blend. I'll circle the consonant blend. Who can underline the beginning or initial consonant in the other two names?" As Miss Hanks spoke, she filled in the semantic map and continued to emphasize other important skills that were apparent in the map, such as "recognizes sound/symbols of short and long vowels" and "understands and applies syllabication rules".



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At the completion of the lesson, Miss Hanks and her students agreed that it would be a good idea to study much more about their school and the people who work in it. Therefore, Miss Hanks and her students decided to meet again the next day in order to brainstorm ideas for a new unit on school workers.

During this first meeting, Miss Hanks encouraged her students to "speak in a complete sentence" and "listen attentively". She modeled these behaviors continuously for her students and she praised them for appropriate behavior and for making effective contributions to the group. Because Miss Hanks was very familiar with her reading/language arts district objectives, she knew that during this meeting the following first grade objectives were covered:

1. orally expresses ideas in complete sentences
2. makes simple predicate agree with simple subject
3. uses appropriate regular noun form (singular or plural)
4. uses proper word order for adjective, nouns, verbs, and adverbs in sentences
5. uses a, an, and the appropriately
6. uses singular and plural possessive pronouns: my, mine, his, her, hers, our, ours, their, theirs, your, yours
7. uses connecting words (and, but, or) appropriately
8. listens attentively
9. follows oral instructions

10 recognizes and forms the present tense to verbs with s and es endings

11. recognizes and forms plural nouns by adding s, as in boys

12. extends knowledge of word meanings

13. recognizes long and short vowels, silent vowels, and r-dominated vowels

14. recognizes sound/symbol for consonant blends

15. applies syllabication rules to decode unknown words

16. recognizes capital letters

17. capitalizes proper names

That afternoon, Miss Hanks made some notes in her notebook about students who needed extra help with some of the objectives covered in the group meeting. She decided that ad hoc groups would meet every morning from 8:45 to 9:10 to work on reinforcing such objectives as "extending knowledge of word meanings" and "recognizes sound/symbol for long and short vowels and consonant blends".

The following day, Miss Hanks and her students met to brainstorm ideas for activities and materials for the unit. Miss Hanks led the group. She recorded her students' ideas on a chart to demonstrate the reading/writing connection, and she encouraged her students to speak freely, listen attentively, generate ideas and take some responsibility for planning their work. These are the ideas which the students and Miss Hanks thought of:

1. Get books about schools and the people who work in schools from the school library, public library, bookstores, and home.

2. Invite school workers to visit the class to speak about their work.

3. Devise task cards for learning centers.

4. Order movies and videos about school workers.

5. Learn how to spell and print the school workers' names and their jobs.

6. Make a game about school workers.

7. Record school workers' names and jobs in students' personal dictionaries under the appropriate alphabet letter.

8. Learn how to write a letter to invite the school workers to visit the class.

9. Learn how to write a thank you note for the school workers who visited the class.

10. Create a mural showing the school workers at their jobs.

11. Write stories about school workers. These can be placed on the mural.

12. Count the number of workers in the school. How many all together? in the cafeteria? in the office? men/women?

13. Make individual graphs and a large group chart showing the number of workers in the school according to jobs, and men or women.

14. Look through basal readers to see if there are any stories about schools or school workers.

15. Check the calendar to see when each school worker will be invited to visit.

16. Decide which groups will write letters of invitation and thank you to the individual workers.

17. Make a large book on school workers, and read this book to the kindergarten children.

18. Create a play or puppet show about school workers.

19. Visit school workers on the job. Ask them questions about their work. Share this information with the second grade class.

20. Role play with friends, Miss Hanks, and parents in order to practice asking school workers appropriate questions.

Miss Hanks then helped her students organize their list of activities chronologically; that is, what had to be done first, second, and so forth.

Miss Hanks also created task cards for the classroom's learning centers with school workers as the theme. Since she is expected to show that she has covered certain objectives, she structured the task card activities with this in mind. An example of one of her reading/language arts task cards follows:

Task Card One (1)
The School Nurse

We have a wonderful school nurse. She helps us when we are sick. She checks our eyes and ears and weight. Her name is Mrs. Rose. Mrs. Rose is very friendly and kind. Her office is located on the first floor next to the principal's office.

1. Draw a picture of our nurse.

2. Write a sentence or dictate a sentence to Miss Hanks about our nurse under your picture.

3. Read your sentence to a friend or to Miss Hanks.

4. Use some of the words on this task card which begin with a consonant in a new sentence.

5. Use some of the words on this task card which end with a consonant in a new sentence.

6. Use some of the words on this task card which have short vowel sounds in a new sentence.

7. Use some of the words on this task card which have long vowel sounds in a new sentence.

8. Find the three two-syllable words on this task card and record them in your personal dictionary under the appropriate alphabet heading.

9. Give Miss Hanks your card so she can check it after lunch.

Miss Hanks knew that the following objectives were covered in this task card:

1. recognizes initial and final consonants
2. recognizes short and long vowels
3. recognizes two syllable words
4. alphabetizes with first letter
5. follows written directions
6. writes a descriptive sentence
7. reads number words

Miss Hanks also knew that the activities listed on this task card integrated the curriculum in the areas of reading, language arts, art, penmanship, mathematics and social studies; thus providing practice in skill areas, but in a meaningful and functional manner related to a theme determined by students' interests and needs.

For the next three weeks all class activities and lessons were centered around the theme of School Workers. Miss Hanks kept a list of all of the lessons and activities. She included notes about what objectives needed to be reinforced or further reviewed in ad hoc or whole-class groups. Her final list follows.

1. Reading instruction: Students read about school workers with the following objectives emphasized: listens and recalls story details; understands details and specific information in a sentence; understands details and specific information in a paragraph; identifies the topic sentence and main idea; draws conclusions;

understands cause and effect; understands character traits, feelings and motives; relates what is read to personal experience; distinguishes between real and make-believe stories read by the teacher; recognizes initial and final consonants; recognizes initial consonant blends; recognizes long and short vowels. (Andrew's reading group plus Sharon and Peter need to review topic sentences, main idea and cause and effect. Whole class needs to review character traits, feelings and motives.)

2. Penmanship: All penmanship lessons such as daily board work (for example: "Mr. Ferris is our principal.") emphasized these objectives: begins sentences with a capital letter; prints proper names with a capital letter; ends a sentence with a period or question mark; forms alphabet letters correctly. (Whole class needs review.)

3. Creative writing: Topics such as "Why I like Mr. Brinn our librarian", "What job I would like to have in this school", "What I learned from Miss Otis' visit" emphasized these objectives: writes one or two complete sentences about a topic; writes a story involving people; and writes a story using own ideas. (Six students still give dictation rather than write their own sentence. Whole class needs further opportunities to write creatively.)

4. Oral language expansion: Class discussion of further activities for the unit, emphasized these objectives: speaks in complete sentences; listens attentively;

extends knowledge of word meanings; makes simple predicate agree with simple subject. (Andrew's group needs to learn to listen. Whole class needs to continue to extend knowledge of word meanings.)

5. Mathematics: After gathering information about school workers and their jobs, this information was categorized and classified emphasizing these objectives: counting; graphing; matching numbers with numerals; identifying sets with similar and dissimilar attributes; creating and solving word problems (e.g., Ten people went to work on the school bus. Five people were teachers. Two people were nurses. The rest were students. How many students were on the bus?). (Whole class needs much work in solving word problems. Andrew, Thomas, and Amanda need further work matching numbers with numerals.)

6. Art: Unit activities included murals, illustrating creative writing, decorating invitations and thank you notes, making costumes (e.g., nurse hats and school crossing guard stop signs), and designing a "school workers" game. (Whole class was successful.)

7. Social Studies: After listening to the guest speakers, asking appropriate questions about their training, and the importance of their job to the school and the community, the following objectives were emphasized: understanding of human beings interdependence; knowledge of human beings contributions to society in general; community living. (Continue to reinforce interdependence aspect of our

society through collaborative learning groups.)

Summary

Teachers who are expected to follow mandated district objectives yet have a whole language orientation may wish to follow Miss Hanks' example. Miss Hanks is successful as a whole language teacher in a conventional educational setting because she is knowledgeable about the objectives identified as important to her grade level, and because she knows how to make learning meaningful, personal, and functional to students. In the vignette shared in this article, she recognized her students' need to learn about school workers and she encouraged them to participate in making decisions about what activities would be included in a unit on this topic. Furthermore, she incorporated multiple disciplines whenever appropriate. By making conscious decisions about instruction in relationship to her students' needs, Miss Hanks shows us that mandated district objectives and whole language teaching are, indeed, compatible.

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